

# News Release

# Senator Pete V. Domenici

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JULY 12, 2000

## SENATE ACCEPTS DOMENICI FOREST HEALTH INITIATIVE

### Senator's Amendment, Funding Added to Interior Appropriations Bill

WASHINGTON -- The Senate today accepted an amendment authored by U.S. Senator Pete Domenici to reduce the threat of catastrophic fires to communities near public lands by expanding the authority of federal agencies to remove dangerous undergrowth in forests.

Domenici's national forest health amendment was today added to the **FY2001 Interior Appropriations Bill** on a voice vote. The amendment would provide \$240.3 million for a program that authorizes the U.S. Forest Service (\$120 million) and the Department of Interior (\$120.3 million) to remove hazardous material to alleviate immediate emergency threats to so-called "urban or wildland interface areas" or where communities abut forests.

The Domenici amendment **would not** override current environmental, labor, or civil rights laws. It would, however, expand federal activities to clear forests of excess "fuel" in areas where federal lands interface with communities.

"The bipartisan support for this effort is significant, and for New Mexico the potential is great, particularly in rural areas where it will improve forest health and create job opportunities. Overall, it sends the Clinton administration and its more extreme environmental allies a message that we cannot continue to put the lives and well-being of Americans at risk just because they live near a national forest," Domenici said. "Whether it is in New Mexico and Florida, our land managers' efforts to promote forest health have been hamstrung by lawsuits and regulations. This legislation and funding will give them the wherewithal to improve forest health and safety."

U.S. Senator Jeff Bingaman cosponsored the Domenici amendment, as well as Senators Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.) and Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.) as primary cosponsors.

"We need to reduce the volume of fuel in areas immediately surrounding threatened communities," Bingaman said. "I feel strongly that communities facing the greatest forest fire threat should be at the front of the line for funding. Many of them, if not a majority, are right here in New Mexico. These funds are an important step toward reducing that threat."

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More than 400,000 acres in New Mexico have been consumed by wildfires this

year, including more than 48,000 acres consumed when the disastrous Cerro Grande Fire blazed through Los Alamos in May.

“The Forest Service’s own experts tell me that they know what needs to be done to make our forests better, but that they cannot take action. This legislation would give them a well-balanced plan that would improve public safety, forest health and provide some incentives for local employment for youth and micro-businesses,” Domenici said.

In order to provide employment and training opportunities to people in rural communities, the Domenici amendment would allow the Interior Department and U.S. Forest Service to encourage contracts for such work, with an emphasis on: (1) local, non-profit, or cooperative entities; (2) Youth Conservation Corps crews or related partnerships with state, local, and non-profit youth groups; (3) Small or micro-businesses; or (4) other entities that will hire or train a significant percentage of local people to complete such contracts.

The measure directs the secretaries of Interior and Agriculture to publish a list before Sept. 30 of urban wildland interface communities within the vicinity of federal lands that are at risk from wildfire. While national in scope, the plan places emphasis on the most immediate needs in Region 3, which includes New Mexico and Arizona.

The list would be required to include a description of the status of work to reduce the number of at-risk communities. The Forest Service and Interior Department would also have to report by May 1, 2001, the reasons--not limited to a lack of available funds--why there are no treatments ongoing or being prepared for any remaining communities on the list.

The proposal directs the Secretary of Agriculture, within 30 days after enactment of this Act, to publish in the Federal Register the Forest Service’s cohesive strategy for protecting fire-adapted ecosystems and explanation of any differences between the strategy and other related ongoing policymaking activities, such as the administration’s national forest system transportation policy and roadless area protection initiative. The Agriculture Secretary would also have to provide 30 days for public comment on the cohesive strategy and accompanying evaluation. The input received would be considered in other appropriate ongoing policy making activities in the related federal rulemakings.

“I believe this effort will also work to make the federal agencies more accountable to communities by telling them what is being done to protect their area, and what roadblocks keep them from doing more,” Domenici said.

The Interior and Agriculture secretaries would also have been expected to jointly report to Congress, by May 1, 2001, with recommendations for additional funding needs, an inventory of communities at risk that require hazard fuel reduction treatments, and additional authorities needed, if any, to increase the amount of fuel reduction treatments in high fire risk urban wildland interface areas.

This amendment is similar to the legislation that recently drew a veto threat from the White House, when it was proposed as part of an emergency supplemental appropriations package.